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Draft report of the Committee on Information

Chapter III
General debate and consideration of substantive questions

1. Statements during the general debate were made by the following States members of the Committee on Information: Algeria, Bangladesh, Belarus, Brazil, Colombia (on behalf of the Rio Group), Croatia, Cuba, Egypt, Gabon, Guyana, India, Indonesia, Jamaica (on behalf of the States members of the Caribbean Community), Japan, Kazakhstan, Netherlands (on behalf of the States members of the Western European and Other States Group), Nigeria (on behalf of the Group of 77 and China), Pakistan, Russian Federation, Senegal, Syrian Arab Republic, Tunisia, Ukraine, United Arab Emirates and Yemen.

2. The Director of the International Programme for the Development of Communication of the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) addressed the Committee, as did the President of the United Nations Correspondents Association and the representative of the World Association of Former United Nations Interns and Fellows.

3. In taking up the substantive questions before the Committee, all speakers pointed to the important commemoration of World Press Freedom Day. Many delegations paid tribute to the journalists around the world who had lost their lives or suffered injuries in the line of duty, and condemned the use of violence against them. One speaker on behalf of a large group said that it should be remembered that without an independent and critical media corps, the United Nations would not be able to do its work in helping to resolve crises and conflicts. Others criticized all attempts to control or influence the media. Many speakers pointed to the important role which the media could play in improving the quality of life of people everywhere. The President of the United Nations Correspondents Association said that no democratic society could exist without press freedom. He also called for the further improvement of working conditions for the working press at Headquarters.

4. Many speakers called for a new, more just and effective global information and communications order. They agreed that in recent years, tremendous innovations had been made in the field of information technology, which had transformed all areas of human activity. However, while the flow of information was a global phenomenon, the spread of information technology remained restrictive in nature. In the words of one speaker, state-of-the-art advances in mass communications, the Internet in particular, had rendered the world a neighbourhood, but not a community. Many delegations felt that the gulf was widening between developed and developing countries. One speaker representing a large group questioned to what extent the developing countries were able to supply the information highway with news and perspectives relevant to their interests. If their access did not improve, they would remain passengers on that highway rather than becoming drivers. On the subject of international information security, one speaker

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expressed concern about inherent risks in the new information technologies, such as the danger of an erosion of the identity of nations and a standardization of culture, and pointed to the need for enabling safe information exchange.

5. One speaker on behalf of a large group expressed the view that information was the reservoir of common experience of all for the benefit of all, and to that end a number of delegations agreed that the United Nations had an important role to play in bridging the digital divide. A number of speakers suggested that the Department of Public Information could assist developing countries in improving their capacity in the information field, particularly through the United Nations information centres and training programmes for journalists and also through working with Governments in developing countries on United Nations courses for educational curricula. Several speakers also noted the important work being done by UNESCO through its international programme for the development of communication. One delegation, speaking for a large group, noted that some ideas on information policy that were rooted in the more distant past had become obsolete, and new ways to ensure the goals of freedom of opinion and expression must be found.

6. One speaker pointed out that the role of information and communication technologies in development was under serious consideration by the Economic and Social Council and would be taken up by the Council at the high-level segment of its substantive session of 2000. However, despite its potential for human development, there was an unequal pace and spread of the information and communication technologies, and there was an urgent need to rectify that situation. Another speaker supported the call by the Joint United Nations Information Committee (JUNIC) for a broad discussion of the issue of strengthening the information and communications capacity of the United Nations system.

7. In addressing the public information policies of the United Nations, all delegations expressed support for the reorientation of the Department of Public Information, which had been initiated by the Secretary-General to strengthen the role of public information and as an important part of his efforts to create a culture of communications within the Organization. One speaker noted that the United Nations had to be both competent and competitive in the worldwide race for transmitting information, and delegations commended the efforts of the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information and his staff to carry out their activities with increased efficiency and effectiveness. All agreed that the Department was making great strides in maximizing its outreach capabilities, at a time when the demands being placed on it outpaced available resources. Speakers expressed their appreciation for the many useful reports before the Committee, which had been circulated in a timely manner and would be discussed later in the session in more detail. One delegation regretted the delay in their issuance in all official languages. Many delegations mentioned the value they attached to the work of the Committee on Information in guiding the Department in its work and to the spirit of cooperation and consensus which existed among members.

8. One delegation on behalf of a large group agreed with the steps taken so far to ensure that United Nations public information activities would help to build a broad-based global support for the Organization. Another delegation, speaking for a large group, noted that reform meant moving away from trying to "do it all" towards developing new strategies and approaches. This speaker was joined by another in expressing the opinion that the Department should review its policies as part of the continuing reorientation process in order to prioritize its activities, and should decide upon the most effective mix of media to be used. Several delegations pointed to the new United Nations News Service as a key component of an enhanced media outreach strategy. One country noted that a large segment of humanity lacked awareness about the United Nations. A number of delegations emphasized that the Department's reorientation exercise must maintain and improve its activities in areas of special interest to developing countries in order to meet the aspirations of the people there. Many speakers called for programmes to address the special needs of the African continent, and one delegation requested that the interests of the countries in transition be taken into consideration in information programmes.

9. All speakers supported the determination on the part of the United Nations to empower and reposition itself in the new millennium as a body capable of meeting a wide range of challenges and of serving people everywhere more effectively. They agreed that

the Millennium Assembly and Summit provided a unique opportunity to publicize the activities of the Organization with renewed vigour and maximize its exposure in the symbolically important year of 2000. A number of delegations supported the millennium promotional campaign, which they thought to be important and timely, and they appreciated the Department's initiative in planning and promoting a campaign that would both publicize the events but also use the opportunity of the millennium to better connect the peoples of the world to the United Nations. Many speakers expressed support for the slogan "The UN Works", which would illustrate the achievements of the Organization in different fields, and agreed that it should be a key element in a long-term information strategy, which would capture the momentum of the millennium. One delegation, on behalf of a large group, requested that the Havana Declaration and Programme of Action be circulated as part of the documentation for the Millennium Assembly, and that the Department assist the Group of 77 in the implementation of the programme. One delegation urged the Department to adopt measures to help implement the goals put forward in the Secretary-General's millennium report, and pointed specifically to the proposed global commitment to poverty reduction in Africa. One speaker observed that the chronic insolvency of the Organization meant that it could not respond effectively to the developmental aspirations of the majority of its members, and he hoped the Millennium Summit would provide the impetus for placing the Organization on a sound financial footing. Adequate resources were required, he said, to accomplish its tasks, the first and foremost being the promotion of sustained growth and development in developing countries.

10. All speakers supported the Department's use of new information technologies, in particular the United Nations web site, to widely disseminate the message of the Organization. At the same time, they strongly urged the continued use of the traditional media — print, radio and television — in outreach activities, since clearly all parts of the world were not benefiting equally from technological innovations. Many delegations stressed the importance of radio to the developing countries in terms of its outreach and cost-effectiveness. Several delegations noted that the Department was proposing an integrated multimedia news operation, aimed at delivery of United Nations news directly to media organizations worldwide, which they expected would improve access for developing countries.

11. All speakers commended the Department for its important work on maintaining and enriching the United Nations web site despite the fact that progress was being made within existing resources. Several noted the remarkable number of hits recorded at the web site, which was a clear indication of the tremendous interest in the Organization worldwide. Another delegation was heartened by the growing number of accesses to the web site from users in the developing countries. One speaker pointed to the new Millennium web page, which was very important for the millennium promotional campaign, and another congratulated the Department for including links to pages devoted to the United Nations and civil society and the United Nations and business. Several delegations praised the United Nations news centre on the web site. One Committee member stressed the need for accuracy in the informational content of the United Nations web site in view of the "omnivorous" character of the Internet and its rules of speed and immediacy. Another noted that objectivity was paramount and that the use of information for political purposes must be prohibited. One speaker, on behalf of a large group, said that parliamentary documentation and the United Nations treaty collection should be freely available on the web site.

12. All speakers supported the multilingual enrichment of the United Nations web site. Many noted that there had been significant progress in achieving greater parity in all six official languages. One delegation pointed in particular to the enhanced Arabic site, while others called for further promotion of the Arabic language in all information output. Several speakers pointed to the welcome fact that three posts relating to the Arabic, Chinese and Russian web sites had been made permanent. One delegation, speaking on behalf of a large group, noted that full modular parity for all official languages remained the ultimate objective, and urged the Department to follow that approach in a cost-effective manner and with a focus on textual content. Another speaker called for more study of the matter, and strongly restated his position against that approach. One delegation thought that the goal of language parity must be measured against the two key criteria of increased accessibility and cost-effectiveness, and was of the view that there were other issues of equal or greater importance for consideration.

Several speakers, including one speaking for a large group, supported the proposed feasibility study on restructuring the web site to become more user-friendly and flexible, if financed within existing resources. The latter speaker requested the Department to submit to the Committee at its next session draft guidelines for the United Nations web site, with rules for content-planning and publication policies.

13. With respect to the traditional media, in particular radio, many speakers expressed their support for the launch of direct broadcasting by the United Nations and were pleased with the Department's efforts with regard to the pilot project on the development of an international radio broadcasting capacity. Several speakers welcomed the redeployment by the Department of resources from the approved programme budget for the 2000-2001 biennium for this purpose. One delegation enquired whether the network of information centres could assist in the fund-raising efforts for the pilot project.

14. One delegation expressed special satisfaction with the results of the agreement established by the public radio network of his country and United Nations Radio, which allowed for information in Portuguese to reach a vast number of listeners through a receiving network. It also pointed to the number of Portuguese speakers in Africa, Asia and Europe, who also had access to the information compiled by the United Nations in New York, and called for another Portuguese-language producer to be added to United Nations Radio. One speaker noted that United Nations radio broadcasts in Bahasa Indonesian constituted the most effective means of communicating information to more than 200 million people in the respective region. Another speaker noted that the General Assembly, in its 2000-2001 programme budget, had agreed to reinstate two posts for Kiswahili radio producers, and his delegation wished to see these posts filled. Another delegation on behalf of a large group called for full programming in French and Creole to Haiti by the Caribbean Radio Unit, which had yet to be fulfilled. Regarding the Department's television output, one speaker, on behalf of a large group, noted that the live feeds and other easily assembled raw materials for redisseminators were welcomed.

15. One speaker denounced the aggression perpetrated daily against his country through radio and television broadcasts emanating from another country, which were flagrant violations of international law and were illegal acts which were being committed using increasingly sophisticated technology.

16. One delegation noted that the press releases should bring out the intergovernmental aspect of the Organization's work. Another noted that it wished to see improvement in access for delegations to information emanating from the Office of the Spokesman for the Secretary-General. One speaker commended the *UN Chronicle* and its new editorial approach.

17. All speakers stressed the importance of the work of the Department of Public Information in the area of sustainable human development, and several noted that the thematic information programmes were receiving wide publicity. They believed that continued and heightened focus should be given to publicizing the Organization's activities and accomplishments in such areas as poverty eradication, health, education, the rights of women and combating terrorism, drugs and international crime. One speaker endorsed the importance of thematic campaigns on human rights, believing them particularly important to people under foreign occupation or alien domination. Another suggested that selective emphasis on a particular human right might not be desirable. One delegation welcomed the Department's work on the United Nations Year of Dialogue among Civilizations, and another called for emphasis on the International Year for the Culture of Peace, the International Decade for a Culture of Peace and Non-violence for the Children of the World, and the Third Conference on the Least Developed Countries. Several speakers noted that the special needs of the African countries were being recognized, and stressed that campaign themes should be reflective of international concerns on multilateral development cooperation and disarmament, especially the elimination of all weapons of mass destruction, particularly nuclear weapons. One speaker on behalf of a large group commended the Department for its efforts in promoting the Tenth Quadrennial United Nations Conference on Trade and Development, and looked forward to similar coverage on the special sessions of the General Assembly on the five-year review of the Fourth World Conference on Women and the World Summit for Social Development, as well as the World Conference against Racism and the special session of the General Assembly on the follow-up to the World Summit for Children. Two speakers appreciated the efforts of the Department to highlight the consequences

of the Chernobyl catastrophe on a special page on the web site, with one suggesting that the page provide links to the local organizations concerned in Belarus. One delegation called for appropriate measures to enhance world public awareness of the problems and needs of the Semipalatinsk region, which had been affected by nuclear tests, as called for by the General Assembly. One country thanked the Department for its valuable support in helping organize events to celebrate its 500th anniversary. One speaker welcomed and fully supported the Department's initiative on the organization of internship programmes, and several others strongly supported the annual training programme for broadcasters and journalists from developing countries.

18. A number of delegations appreciated the efforts of the Department of Public Information to improve public awareness about United Nations peacekeeping and other political missions, and pointed to the importance of prompt information support for newly launched missions. Several speakers noted in particular the coverage on the United Nations web site of missions in East Timor and Kosovo. One delegation said that any future studies looking into the rapid deployment of public information means and equipment to new peacekeeping missions and humanitarian assistance activities must include measures to insulate the international response to such situations from any biases or distortions in the media coverage. Another observed that information activities to provide local populations with impartial and reliable information on the goals of a peace-restoration mission or a post-conflict peace-building process were important. He went on to say that the principle of impartiality should also apply to the coverage of peacekeeping operations, as it could enhance success and also personnel safety and security, and cooperation between the Department of Public Information and the Department of Peacekeeping Operations was instrumental at the planning and implementation stages. In addition, his delegation placed great emphasis on the central role played by the Department of Public Information in the selection of spokespersons for United Nations missions.

19. A number of speakers expressed their appreciation for the information resources of the Dag Hammarskjöld Library. One observed that the Dag Hammarskjöld Library was becoming a virtual library with world outreach and was making United Nations information widely accessible electronically to a growing number of readers and users. However, he said, it was still necessary to build up the Library's strength in books and journals. Another speaker commended the efforts of the Library to redesign its services to take into account technological advances, and hoped that the training programme for permanent missions would be reinstated. One delegation speaking also for a group, said that the recent launching of the United Nations Bibliographic Information System (UNBIS) on the Internet (UNBISNET) was welcomed.

20. All delegations praised the work of the United Nations information centres, which in the words of one speaker represented the face of the United Nations in 65 countries around the world. One speaker said that for the Group of 77, the centres were a vital mechanism for United Nations outreach, and therefore the move to enhance their effectiveness through the integration process was supported. He noted that the guidelines for the functions of the centres integrated with the field offices of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) were appreciated, and that additional information on the status of the respective centres on a regional basis, including levels of staffing and equipment, should be forthcoming. Many speakers agreed that integration was a positive process to pool resources and unify the Organization's image; however, they stressed that it should be done on a case-by-case basis, in consultation with the host country. One delegation observed that coordination between UNDP and information centres under the leadership of resident representatives was key to achieving the objectives of integration. Several speakers agreed that the functional autonomy of the information component should be preserved. Another found unacceptable the operational guidelines for the integrated centres, which in his view appeared to reduce the autonomy of the national information officers. Several speakers said that the Secretary-General's review had indicated that in most cases the integration process did not adversely affect the performance of the centres, but the review process must be ongoing. One delegation requested that the Department of Public Information reconsider the integration process.

21. A number of delegations supported the strengthening of resources to the information centres for all their many information activities provided to local populations. One delegation emphasized that the work of information centres was particularly important

in developing countries, where the access to information technology was still weak. Several speakers noted that information centres should make their facilities available for educational purposes, for example to help the public access new technologies. The staff of the centres should be trained in, among other things, the creation of web sites to adequately reflect the culture of the region. One speaker stressed the positive role being played by the United Nations information centre at Dakar, as well as the need for its strengthening. Another speaker noted that he could find no justification for the integration of the United Nations information centre at Dhaka, and elsewhere, based merely on financial constraints, and reiterated the need to restore that centre's independent status and appoint a full-time director. One delegation reiterated the view that the United Nations information centre at New Delhi should continue to be headed by a full-time director at the D-1 level. Another pointed out that his country remained on the list of those wishing to host a United Nations information centre or information component. He looked forward to a progress report, and noted that such a centre or component could operate in conjunction with the UNDP office at Zagreb. The work of the United Nations information centre at Jakarta was greatly appreciated, according to another delegation. In its view, however, integration should be approached with caution, since recent surveys had indicated a lower level of programme delivery and fewer activities. One speaker on behalf of a large group commended the United Nations information centre at Port-of-Spain, and looked forward to more information on the proposed information component in the UNDP office at Kingston. One delegation said that his country attached great importance to the work being done by the United Nations information centre at Islamabad, stressing the need to further strengthen its effectiveness, and another paid tribute to the United Nations information centre at Sana'a.

22. At the end of the general debate, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information made a statement responding to some of the questions raised by delegations.

Chapter IV
Consideration of the reports of the Secretary-General

23. The nine reports of the Secretary-General were introduced by the Under-Secretary-General and senior staff members of the Department and were discussed individually by the Committee.

24. Concerning the report of the Secretary-General on the reorientation of United Nations activities in the field of public information and communications (A/AC.198/2000/2), the Department reviewed key measures that it was taking to enhance the communications profile of the Organization in all regions of the world, through the increased use of new technology, and through initiatives such as the United Nations News Service and better coordination within the Secretariat. The Department said that it was in the difficult position of "doing more with less" because its mandates were expanding as available resources were being reduced. One delegation asked about the costs of conversion of television transmissions from analog to digital format, and was informed by the Department that it was an unavoidable capital expense, since the industry standard would be digital in five years. Another enquired about the income being generated for the Organization by the United Nations *Treaty Series* online, and was told that the figure was US$ 50,000 since 1 March 2000. In reply to a query about the millennium promotional campaign, the Department responded that this would be a unique opportunity to highlight all of the Organization's activities. One speaker asked for more emphasis on United Nations activities aimed at Africa, aside from the Security Council proceedings, and the Department pointed to the coverage being provided by *Africa Recovery*.

25. Concerning the report of the Secretary-General on the proposed medium-term plan for the period 2002-2005 (A/AC.198/2000/8), the Department highlighted its four subprogrammes. Several delegations expressed support for the objectives of the plan, although one speaker suggested that it would have been preferable if the objectives and expected accomplishments had been more precisely stated. The Department responded that the plan was by design as broad as possible, since it was a "road map" and not an exhaustive list of its every activity. One delegation asked whether the campaigns against acquired immunodeficiency syndrome (AIDS) and on natural disasters, such as

cyclones, could be strengthened. Another asked if the Dialogue among Civilizations could be included in the thematic areas.

26. Concerning the report of the Secretary-General on the activities of JUNIC in 1999 (A/AC.198/2000/9), the Department noted that the desire to strengthen the culture of communications within the Organization was shared by all the specialized agencies, programmes and funds of the United Nations system. The Department provided details of the plans for the United Nations system pavilion at the upcoming Hannover 2000 exposition, on the theme "Humankind, nature, technology". At the next session of JUNIC, the topics for consideration would include, among others, the use of television in transmitting the United Nations message and the millennium promotional campaign. Several delegations agreed that it would be helpful if more access to the informational materials from the United Nations pavilion could be provided, particularly for the benefit of those who would not have the opportunity to visit, to which the Department replied that a web site was in preparation.

27. As to the report on the millennium promotional campaign, the Department noted that the campaign was the brainchild of the Committee. It had been developed to demonstrate that the United Nations made a difference in the daily lives of ordinary people, and consequently to increase public awareness and grass-roots support for the Organization. The aim of the slogan "The UN Works" was to put a human face on United Nations outreach. The Department emphasized that the campaign had short- and long-term objectives, which were first to build momentum towards the Summit, and second to use the millennium for launch of a long-term communications strategy. The campaign would deal with children's issues, among others, and the Department had been holding discussions with the United Nations Children's Fund. A number of speakers noted that their delegations had strong interest in the Millennium Summit and requested details on the media accreditation procedures. The Department reported that these instructions were being prepared and would be distributed shortly. The Department would also do its utmost to facilitate access for journalists during the Summit. One Committee member was concerned that some of the major promotional activities would take place only a few months before the Summit, particularly because summer was a "lean" news period. The Department noted that the campaign would be an ongoing one.

28. With regard to the report of the Secretary-General on the multilingual development, maintenance and enrichment of United Nations web sites (A/AC.198/2000/4), the Department stressed that the web site had grown as a supplement to rather than at the expense of traditional media. The Department hoped to automate many tasks to increase production and make more materials available. Also, in order to put the site on a sound footing, a feasibility study was required. One delegation requested statistics on the number of accesses for the Arabic web site, which the Department agreed to provide. The same speaker hailed the newly converted permanent posts in the web site operation as an indication of the Department's determination to enact General Assembly resolutions on language parity. Several delegations said that they did not support option C-3 contained in the earlier report of the Secretary-General (A/AC.198/1999/9) for achieving language parity, nor did they think that current usage levels should be given so much weight in the process. The Department said that parity would be difficult to achieve; however, the first step was to ensure that the gap between language web sites did not widen. Option C-3 was by no means the only viable one but had been proposed as a cost-effective measure.

29. In highlighting the report of the Secretary-General entitled "Development of an international radio broadcasting capacity for the United Nations: progress report on the pilot project" (A/AC.198/2000/6), the Department thanked delegations for the support they had given to the pioneering project to produce news in six languages every day. The Department said this project was part of its overall effort to provide United Nations information directly to media around the world, and would significantly increase the amount of information about the United Nations disseminated directly to audiences globally. It was emphasized that effective partnerships with broadcasters were required for the success of the effort since they would be the principal conduits for the broadcasts. Interest in the project had been exceptional among radio stations which had responded, and the Department had redeployed US$ 1.7 million for it from its approved budget for the current biennium. It was expected that the first step in the project would begin in time for the Millennium Summit. In response to a question from one delegation about the content of the

broadcasts, the Department replied that the traditional United Nations approach of broadcasting information that was meaningful to the people of individual regions would be used. One speaker was concerned at the low response to the survey from South Asia and said he would look into the matter. Several speakers said that they appreciated the efforts of the Department.

30. The Department introduced the three reports of the Secretary-General concerning the information centres, namely on a case-by-case review of the integration of United Nations information centres with field offices of UNDP (A/AC.198/2000/3), on guidelines for the functioning of United Nations information centres integrated with field offices of UNDP (A/AC.198/2000/4) and on the allocation of resources from the regular budget of the United Nations for information centres in 1999 (A/AC.198/2000/5). The Department emphasized that partnerships with host Governments and United Nations specialized agencies, programmes and funds in the field, especially UNDP, were critical to the effective operation of the centres. A number of delegations wished to have more details on the total allocation of resources to the centres, not just on the allocation of posts, and the Department undertook to provide that information. The Department also stressed that retrenchments in the United Nations had made it necessary to reduce information centre posts, although the hope was that some could be restored when possible. One delegation suggested that the guidelines seemed to diminish the role of the national information officers, but the Department replied that that was not the case since they worked as a team with the resident coordinators, who in many cases also served as centre directors. One speaker asked why the host country had not received a questionnaire for the information centre at Dhaka, and was informed by the Department that only centres which were integrated in 1992 had been included in the review, and the centre at Dhaka was not among them.

31. One delegation asked what the criteria were for appointing centre directors, and suggested that centres in Africa be headed by African nationals. The Department responded that the main criteria were appropriate communications skills; knowledge of the country/region; and appropriate language skills. The Department also confirmed that it was continuing to make efforts to appoint Africans to head centres in Africa. One country was concerned that sharing premises with UNDP often meant that centres would not be located centrally, making access difficult for students and others. The Department replied that these decisions were taken on a case-by-case basis, with access always being a prime consideration. One speaker asked if there had been thought given to moving the centre from Lagos to Nigeria's new capital, Abuja, and was told by the Department that that matter was being looked into, in consultation with the country team. Another delegation enquired about the development of web sites by centres and the Department replied that such development was done at the initiative of the individual centre. One speaker was distressed to note an overall 40 per cent reduction in staffing levels in the centres in the past decade.